

States should ensure rescue at sea and allow safe disembarkation during the COVID-19 crisis.

Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Statement

Strasbourg, 16 April 2020

"Despite the unprecedented challenges European countries face due to COVID-19, saving lives at sea and disembarking survivors in a safe port must continue", stated today Dunja Mijatović, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights.

The Commissioner calls on Council of Europe member states to promptly respond to any call of distress at sea, deploy the necessary rescue capacity in a timely manner, and effectively co-operate to identify a place of safety where survivors can be disembarked, taking all necessary measures to protect the health of all involved.

As the Commissioner already noted in her June 2019 Recommendation, the reduction of state-led search and rescue (SAR) operations, combined with countries' withdrawal from their rescue responsibilities and the adoption of restrictive measures affecting private vessels saving persons in distress at sea, have resulted in a lack of adequate rescue capacity and of effective coordination in the Central Mediterranean. Over the last few days, in response to the COVID-19 emergency, several measures and practices have been adopted in Italy and Malta which have led to the closure of ports to NGO vessels carrying rescued migrants, and to the discontinuation of activities to co-ordinate rescue operations and disembarkation of those in distress. This has further aggravated existing gaps in SAR operations in the Central Mediterranean.

Receiving and assisting those rescued at sea, whilst also protecting public health is a huge challenge at this difficult time. Mindful of the hardship faced by Italy and Malta, the Commissioner calls on all Council of Europe member states, including flag states, to provide effective support and assistance in finding quick solutions (including temporary ones, where necessary), and to ensure that coastal states are not left to tackle this alone. The COVID-19 crisis cannot justify knowingly abandoning people to drown, leaving rescued migrants stranded at sea for days, or seeing them effectively returned to Libya where they are exposed to grave human rights violations. European solidarity and concrete action to share responsibility and protect human rights is now more than ever of the essence.

"In this trying period, we are reminded the hard way of the value of human life and the necessity to preserve the right to life, including of those who, adrift at sea, are far from the public eye", concluded the Commissioner.